



## Flowers of argument and engagement? Reconsidering critical perspectives on adult education and literate practices

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**Abstract:**  
This paper takes up an existing discussion around critical perspectives on adult education, in particular how empowerment and emancipation have been understood. Previously in this journal, concern has been raised with traditional understandings of critical adult education. The problem is that these tend to assume that learners require assistance from experts, be they teachers or researchers, in order to gain understanding of how they are oppressed. The purpose of this paper is to present a deeper engagement with this concern, through an examination of how both empowering and emancipatory adult education have been understood and practiced. The demarcation is examined in the context of the historical development of critical understandings and practices associated with adult literacies learning, as a significant field of adult education where the idea of empowerment and emancipation has been theorised. The ideas and practices associated with empowering literacies are defended as ways for learners to gain positions from which to speak and be heard, as well as support participation in work, community and family life. Informed by the ideas of Jacques Rancière, there is also acknowledgement that societal inequalities are increasing, necessitating a need to consider how literacies—adult education might encourage political transformation and emancipation.

**Introduction**  
The current period is one where adult education policy places emphasis upon pre-defined learning outcomes and instrumental approaches and this is the context in which I consider the idea of education for empowerment and emancipation. In this journal, Wildemeerch (2014) has described the present-day as a situation of ‘complexity, insecurity and unpredictability’ (p. 829), contrasting with the optimism of the 1970s when the assumption that education might emancipate was prevalent. He describes the seventies as a time in the UK, when the numbers of adult education professionals increased and institutions, such as the Open University and the BBC, were developed to support educational approaches incorporating notions of rights and solidarity. There has been a subsequent shift so that nowadays adult education is less about ‘emancipation’ and more orientated towards a discourse of ‘empowerment’ aimed at assisting individuals to compete for employment within a globalised economy.

Whilst defending the idea of emancipation that prevailed in the seventies, Wildemeerch also questions whether the critical and emancipatory practices adopted at that time are helpful nowadays. In particular he casts doubt upon the idea that through critical reflection, participants in adult education might better understand about how systems of domination serve to oppress and deceive, where the role of the educator is to employ dialogic techniques to guide them through to enlightenment as a way out of ‘false consciousness’. Academics and educators have criticised this view of education, not least because it ‘did not feel empowering’ (Ellsworth, 1989), for power is a complex web that educators cannot claim to step outside of in their relations with students. Educators cannot ‘show the way’ for students and when it comes to emancipation, there is not ‘one right answer’ (Fenwick, 2006).

Wildemeersch starts to develop an alternative 'emancipatory' formation for adult education, informed by the work of Rancière (e.g. Rancière, 1991), Fenwick (2006) and Masschelein (2010). To summarise, it is emancipatory pedagogy that might create moments in real time where the existing social order is disrupted, resulting in a reconfiguration in which new ways of being and acting, i.e. new identities, come into play. This contrasts with traditional critical approaches where the aim is to enlighten students about how society oppresses, so that they might work towards creating a more just society in the future.

In this writing I take Wildemeersch's analysis further, defending the idea of *both* empowering and emancipatory education. However, I also concur that distinguishing between the two notions in terms of conceptualisation and practical application is important for extending and continuing discussions amongst educators and researchers about the role and purpose of adult education. In his own historical reflections ~~upon adult education~~, Martin (2006) describes adult education in the 1970s as 'thinking big: it was an intellectual and ideological space where the flowers of argument about meanings and purposes and causes could grow and flourish'. He goes on to pose the questions 'Where have all those flowers of argument and engagement gone?...Do they still matter? Do we still care? Are we better off without them?' The discussion I present in this article seeks to encourage such blooms.

My exploration of education for empowerment and emancipation is contextualised within adult literacies learning, which also gained prominence in the 1970s as part of wider movements and policy developments aimed at social justice. Since then, in the UK, it has grappled with issues relating to widening access to further and higher education, active citizenship and inclusive approaches to teaching and learning (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). It has also been influenced by ways in which empowerment and emancipation can be understood and practiced. It is this aspect that I examine in more detail, considering the historical development of ideas taken up by academics and practitioners and what they mean for classroom practices. I also describe how conceptualisations of empowerment and emancipation have become entangled as perspectives that draw upon understandings of power have been utilized in the critique of the ideas and practices associated with emancipatory education.

Like Wildemeersch I draw upon the work of Rancière, sharing discomfort with the idea that critical adult education should aim at enlightening learners. Whilst I acknowledge the importance of empowering education in enabling learners to gain both a voice and wider participation within society, I extend this disquiet towards the practice of empowering adult learning. I attempt to make a case for going beyond the language of power as a way to of returning attention to concerns raised within the emancipatory traditions, such as the character of the 'real time' relationship between teachers and students and, more broadly, how education might encourage political transformation.

I proceed firstly by describing how, historically, empowerment has come to be understood in adult literacies education. I then describe something of what emancipation has meant and could mean, and what this implies for the critique of empowering adult literacies education. I avoid offering a blueprint or method for emancipatory education, but offer some opinions about what emancipatory literacies education cannot be and why this matters.

### Understanding empowerment and adult literacies

An empowering education has been summarised as individualised activity that prepares learners for participation in a globalised economy, which can be contrasted with alternatives that might emancipate (Inglis, 1997, pp. 13-14; Wildemeersch, 2014). However, researchers and practitioners

who vocalise strongly against adult education for economic and other instrumental outcomes frequently employ the language of power or empowerment to describe the form that alternatives might take. For example, this is noticeable amongst those who have described or critiqued Paulo Freire’s work (e.g. Brookfield, 2005; or Taylor, 1993; Coben, 1997; Ellsworth, 1989; Jackson, 2008). Notably, in the research and practice of adult literacies learning, the idea of ‘powerful’ or ‘empowering’ approaches for learners has gained popularity. Adult education that does not take the operations of power into account is assumed to serve a socialising or normalising function for students, so replicating existing power structures. (Crowther, Tett and Hamilton, 2001; Janks, 2010; Gee, 1996; Duckworth and Ade-Ojo, 2015; Grenfell, M., Bloome, D., Hardy, C., Pahl, K., Rowsell, J. & Street, B, 2012).

Attention has been given to understanding what an empowering literacies education might mean for the practice of adult educators, including conceptualisations of power or empowerment and I summarise these below. The ideas emerged from academic research and practice in adult education where language and literacy are considered as social practices, known as New Literacies Studies (NLS) (e.g. Street, 1984; Heath, 1983; Barton, 1994). NLS countered the traditional understanding of literacy as a series of pre-defined skills and knowledge facts relating to reading and writing, where associated literacies programmes tended to position adult learners as having a functional deficit which could be rectified through literacies learning. This functional conceptualisation still has a powerful influence on the field of adult literacy policy and practice internationally (Tett, Hamilton and Crowther, 2012), but less influential now are some of the ideas allied historically to this skills based understanding of literacy. For example, that there are predictable and universal consequences of learning to read and write such as the development of rational thought or the ability to analyse and order information. This type of argument fuelled persuasive myths that the acquisition of literacy serves to civilise groups identified as being deviant, such as prisoners or unmarried mothers (see Lankshear and Knobel, 2003, p. 4). Related, was the idea that there are societal consequences of making populations more literate in terms of improved ~~economics-economies~~ and culture, allowing non-literate groups to be assessed as primitive or underdeveloped. The work of NLS researchers and educators has debunked such myths, asserting an alternative ‘social practice’ conceptualisation that acknowledges how literate practices are rooted in contexts of power (Street, 1984; 2012). Consequently, it can be assumed that there are no predetermined outcomes of teaching reading and writing, for literacy has no effects or meaning aside from the particular cultural contexts in which it is used (Gee, 1996, p. 59). In practical terms, this means that meaningful adult literacies programmes can and should be rooted in the lived experience of learners instead of the teaching, learning and assessment of decontextualized and isolated literacy skills.

NLS emerged with influence from a range of academic disciplines, in particular sociological theory and linguistics described by Gee (2000) as the ‘social turn’. Alongside there was a corresponding decline in the employment of psychological theory and theories of cognition by academics ~~in relation to~~ as it relates to the scholarship of reading, ~~and writing in relation to~~ and adult literacies learning. This move towards sociological understandings meant that the uses and meanings of literacy could always be viewed as being embedded in relations of *power*, with strong influence from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and also Basil Bernstein (Lankshear, 1999).

In the context of literacies learning, power is typically understood as the inevitable consequence of discourse production and identity formation, resting upon the assumption that all discourse, be it speaking, writing or physical gestures, serves to privilege some speakers, whilst excluding others. What’s important here is that the assumed processes of exclusion (or inclusion) are inherently unrecognisable to speakers and listeners and it is this undetectable aspect of discourse creation that

defines the reproduction of power. The level of power exerted by individuals within social hierarchies relates to the degree to which their discourse excludes in misrecognised ways. Or, to put it another way, being empowered suggests having a measure of control over discourse production, authoring identities that serve one's own interests, or the interests of your group (Gee, 1996). In Bourdieu's terminology, empowerment might be described as accruing linguistic, social or cultural capital, which ultimately can be exchanged for economic advantage (Lankshear, 1997, p. 70; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Following the logic that all discourse replicates power, it seems that the only way to be free from power would be to abstain from all forms of human discourse or ways of expressing identity, i.e. by stopping talking and writing as well as displaying no facial expressions or bodily gestures, which is absurd. Indeed, Bourdieu has been critiqued by researchers in adult education on account of presenting a theory of power that offers little opportunity for escape (e.g. Field, 2005; Tett and Maclachlan, 2007; Inglis, 1997). However, possibilities for empowerment and an empowering literacies education have also been expressed (Crowther et al, 2001; Janks, 2010; Tett et al, 2012; Gee, 1996; Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015; Grenfell et al, 2012). For example, it might be assumed that the structure of discourse can be studied in order to expose how power is replicated and that the methods employed in such scholarship, as well as the resulting knowledge, can be taught to students (Gee, 1996). This type of educational activity has informed the development of literacies programmes that might claim to be empowering (Janks, 2010; Grenfell et al, 2012; Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015).

The scholarship of literate practices that gave rise to the social practice conceptualisation placed emphasis upon ethnography as a research method (e.g. Scribner and Cole, 1981; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). There is a correspondence between these methods and the activities associated with an empowering tutor of adult literacies. For example, a social practice approach to literacy learning aims to contextualise learning within life experiences, where learners may have already built up extensive skills and knowledge that influences the discourses that they use practice. Literacies learning can build upon learners' existing skills and knowledge but from the perspective of power, learners' relationships to their own discourse may be 'largely unconscious' and so 'practitioners in adult education programmes cannot simply ask their participants about their existing literate practices' (Street, 2012, p. 75). It is this type of argument that justifies practitioners using 'ethnographic-style' tools in addition to dialogue with learners, to inform the creation of relevant and potentially empowering literacy programmes.

Literacy education informed by these types of ideas is varied in its purpose, ranging from the use of on-line learning with students of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) that supports and values multiple identities (Simpson and Gresswell, 2012, pp. 193-208), to literacy projects in India which actively seek to avoid deficit models through acknowledgment of pre-existing knowledge and experiences (Hardy, 2012, p. 165). Janks (2010) describes South African students succeeding in university studies, whilst simultaneously valorising discourses learned through their family and culture, going on to obtain professional positions 'from which to speak' (Janks, 2010, 32). Duckworth (2013) describes similar learning experiences in the context of a community literacies project in ~~the North of~~ England whilst Addison (2012) relates how acknowledging Scots language in the context of intergenerational (or family) learning programmes justifies and supports action from voices that are normally unheard.

Such enactments of empowering literacies learning have benefits for both learners and tutors. They motivate ways of enacting adult education that actively assert against learners being positioned as lacking in terms of their skills, knowledge or culture. In the current period of economic austerity,



social practice approaches offer an important alternative to functional and instrumental modes of delivery which are often geared towards narrow conceptions of employability and arguably serve to disempower individuals and their communities (as described by Forster, 2015). Literacies programmes that might encourage voices to be heard hold positive consequences for widening access to further and higher education for adult learners (Hamilton and Hillier, 2001).

However, it is also timely for Wildemeersch (2014) to reconsider critical approaches to adult education and question the assumptions upon which educational activity takes place. Global inequalities and social injustice continue to increase, both within societies and between nation states. Throughout the academic project that Gee (2000) described as the ‘social turn’, including the rise of New Literacies Studies, economic and social inequality has widened (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010). What’s more, in addition to economic exploitation there are worsening crises witnessed by the mass displacement of people due to war, alongside environmental destruction on a colossal scale. It seems appropriate to re-examine how adult education might contribute to political and societal transformation and I consider this question whilst making the assumption that education need not always operate to replicate oppression, injustice and inequality. I commence by returning to the discomfort Wildemeersch (2014) expressed with how critical adult education has traditionally interpreted emancipation. I then consider how this relates to the understanding of empowering literacies described above. Finally, I draw upon Rancière to reconsider emancipatory literacies education and make tentative suggestions as to what this might mean for the practice of adult literacies and what it means to be literate.

**Emancipatory literacies – Into a guddle with Paulo Freire**

The emancipatory potential of education has been dominated by the idea that through dialogue and critical reflection, learners can gain knowledge about the problems that they face so that they might go on to solve them (Wildemeersch, 2014). The educator’s role is to stimulate dialogue and reflective practices because without their interventions, learners will be unable gain cognition of how they are oppressed. Such understandings are closely linked to the ideas of Paulo Freire who has central influence amongst academics associated with critical traditions in adult education, particularly in the development of critical pedagogy in North America (see Irwin, 2012). In the context of adult literacies education, Freire has had less influence amongst NLS researchers but possibly holds more sway with practitioners. Adult literacies learning in communities pre-dates NLS and in the 1970s its radical purpose was informed by Paulo Freire and in the UK, Raymond Williams too with these influences found in early literacies learning materials (e.g. Frost and Hoy, u.d.). When researching the history of adult literacies learning in England, Hamilton and Hillier (2006, p. 116) heard Freire cited as a personal influence with his name mentioned more than any other thinker or role model. However, a question mark remains over what this influence was and how it manifested in the form of practices informed by Freire’s insights. Freire’s emancipation implies practices for adult educators that contrast with those suggested by understandings of discourse, identity and power, as I summarise briefly below.

Freire is well known for his involvement in organising large scale literacy programmes in Brazil (Irwin, 2012) and for designing original approaches for teaching adults to read (see Freire, 1970). However, the ideas Freire developed in his early writings that first informed his pedagogy are not based upon understandings of reading and writing as discourse or as ways to identity formation. In his earlier theoretical work (e.g. Freire 1971; 1970), Freire sets out a theory of educational emancipation resting upon the idea of a false or naïve consciousness where instead, the starting point is to define emancipation and equality. Freire is explicit in describing emancipation as a social endeavour, assuming that humans can live in a social relationship with the social and natural ‘world, described by

a Marxian notion of *praxis* as the simultaneous social reflection and action upon 'the world'. This social reflection and action is reliant upon the uniquely human attributes of love, trust and hope, where engagement with dialogue allows people to relate as co-subjects. Such dialogue allows problems to be pinned down and solved as part of an educational process where we needn't accept the social world as it is, for it can be changed. Emancipation is defined by this dynamic dialogical educational situation where the true nature of the world can be established, so that being free is intimately connected with knowing the truth.

In the context of literacies education, this makes emancipation, famously, perhaps less about 'reading the word' and more about 'reading the world' (Freire, 1986). In turn, literacies for freedom are practices associated with participating in dialogue with others whilst reflecting upon the social and material world and the problems that influence our ability to act. Critical thinking and relationships of trust are crucial and the role of an emancipatory literacies educator would be to encourage these ways of being together. Such an education aims to offer the possibility of a temporary release from society and its institutions which typically function to deny dialogue, breaking down trust and love between people and along with it, hope for the future. For Freire, the denial of dialogue obscures the truth of how society oppresses, necessitating a role for an emancipatory educator who might employ dialogic techniques to guide students through to enlightenment as a way out of 'false consciousness' (Wildemeersch, 2014).

From the perspective of the empowering literacies described above, what's worrying about Freire's ideas is the suggestion that it is possible to create a relationship of equality between educator and students, sustained through dialogue and trust. If power operates in inherently unrecognisable ways then Freire is describing an impossibility that could be dangerous if educators attempt unproblematic and direct translations into practices with students, in the assumption that equality is achievable. Perhaps as a consequence, discussions amongst researchers and practitioners in the field of critical education tend to critique Freire's work from the standpoint that it does not account for power (see Coben, 1997; Ellsworth, 1989; Jackson, 2008) arguing that, therefore, it holds the potential to replicate rather than dismantle hierarchies in society. It seems this thinking has informed the development of Freire's work so that power might be taken into account (e.g. see Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).

There is no mention of empowerment in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1971), which is perhaps unsurprising for an educational and theoretical project undertaken before the emergence of the abovementioned 'social turn' with the associated reliance upon sociological and linguistic theories. Blake and Masschelein (2003) argue that critical pedagogy in the North American tradition has been dominated by critiques or developments of Freire's emancipation that are informed by Bourdieu (and Bernstein), to the extent that two distinctive traditions have been merged into a single project that ultimately is technical and instrumental. Whether the resulting research and educational practices can be claimed to promote instrumentalist programmes might be questionable, particularly as the empowering literacies education that I described above ~~are~~is aimed at countering technical approaches to adult learning. However, it does seem to me that the merger and entanglement of Freire's emancipation with understandings about discourse, power and identity have served to create a guddle<sup>1</sup>. Below, I attempt a form of disentanglement of empowerment and emancipation that might serve to further a discussion about whether education must always serve predetermined and socialising outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> A Scots language term for a muddle, thought to originate with the term 'guddling' as the activity of catching a river fish with your bare hands.

What the two traditions of empowering literacies and Freire’s emancipation hold in common is a reliance upon truth assumptions about how oppressive processes manifest and how educators might intervene to disrupt or subvert these. For Freire, ‘the truth’ is that oppression is replicated through anti-dialogical teaching activity, whilst empowering learning is based upon the axiomatic assumption that all discourse excludes some groups whilst privileging others though inherently undetectable processes. Freire’s emancipation and the empowerment perspective *both* place onus upon educators to, in some sense, to reveal the truth. The difference is that for Freire, dialogical approaches are necessary, as the passing down of knowledge from teacher to student is assumed to replicate oppression (Biesta, 2012). In contrast, empowerment understandings of education might continue to define the relationship between teachers and students as one based upon knowledge transfer (see Galloway, 2015).

**Emancipation and education**

Rancière offers an alternative emancipatory education offering-and a different relationship to the truth, where emancipation is not dependent upon knowledge transfer or the idea that learners need assistance to understand the truth about oppression as a precursor to emancipation (Biesta, 2012; Wildemeersch, 2014; Masschelein, 2010). Like Freire, Rancière’s emancipation rests upon a definition of equality which distinguishes humanity from all other living species. For Freire (1971), only humans can simultaneously reflect and act upon the ‘world’ i.e. enact *praxis*, and all people are equal in this respect. However, for Rancière (1991, pp. 78-79) all humans are guided by an individual will and use this to employ reason, or to put it another way, when it comes to matters relating to emancipation we are all equal in our ability to form opinions, with his own theory being presented as opinion rather than an axiomatic truth. Following this logic, whilst for Freire oppression is taken as the institutionalised suppression of dialogue, for Rancière, it is collective opinion making, enabled by teachers’ explanations to students. Whilst explanatory activity makes society possible it simultaneously fuels the weakening of individual’s wills and intellects as we congregate around common identifications.

Both Freire and Rancière agree that societal oppression is fuelled by processes of knowledge transmission from teacher to student, or from institutional elites to the wider population. This makes emancipatory adult education about attempting to subvert this and for both, it is the particular quality of relationships between educators, students and ‘the world’ that makes emancipation possible as a temporary and fleeting occurrence. For Freire, here there is symmetry as oppression driven by anti-dialogical activity may be countered by an emancipatory education reliant upon dialogue between teachers ~~and~~ students and the social world. With Rancière there is no such logic. Whilst processes of explanation undermine intellectual equality, stopping explaining does not guarantee emancipation. Instead, emancipation, as education, is about demanding exploration of the logic of equality as ‘a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition’ (Rancière, 1995, p. 65). It is about students expressing their own opinions whilst enacting the assumption that all people are intellectual equals.

Rancière is not encouraging the broadcast of any opinions and emancipatory education is not about students writing and talking in any way that takes their fancy. To restate, Rancière is referring to opinions formed whilst enacting their the assumption that we are, all of us, intellectual equals. Such enactments might create new identifications which are significant, but not because they are inscribed with ‘the truth’, rather because they are assumed to be inscribed with ‘equality’. This does not mean that emancipation is a process of identification or authoring new identities, reminiscent of



empowering literacies. For Rancière, identification is 'policing' (Rancière, 1995, p. 68) and emancipatory education as an enactment of equality is a process of 'dis-identification' (Rancière, 1995, Bingham and Biesta, 2010) outlined in the context of defining 'politics' and the 'political'. Identification as policing does not correspond with Freire's 'objectification', where people are prevented from being fully conscious of 'the world' and so there is no reliance upon any notion of 'false consciousness'. Rather, he is referring to how processes of knowledge transmission in society, fuelled through the medium of explanations, by teachers, journalists or academics, encourages people to congregate around shared understandings and identifications instead of giving attention to their own intellects and, significantly, the intellects of others. Emancipation, as education, is about disrupting the processes by which we come to hold common understandings and identifications. Whilst the consequences may solidify as new identifications, it is this fleeting enactment, where explanatory logic collides with the logic of equality that is emancipatory.

When it comes to emancipation, each person is equally able to come to their own opinion in relation to our shared concerns, for everyone has equal intelligence in this respect. With regard to equality and emancipation, what matters is our individual relationship, or 'orbit' around the truth, or the ways in which we come to our opinions (Rancière, 1991, p. 78). Following Masschelein (2010), this alternative understanding of critical education is a 'poor pedagogy' as it does not require legitimacy from society, or the need for training as an expert. Neither is it about becoming more fully conscious of the world, the receiving of knowledge, or learning lessons. Rather, it is about 'paying attention'. It is a 'suspension of judgement' that offers means for experience in that moment, instead of explanations and representations.

Having no blueprint for emancipation is a strength that encourages a basis for accepting 'as valid the cry "I don't know what, but not this!"' (Blake and Masschelein, 2003) as a way to informing the activity of educators. It demands educators not to make easy assumptions about how their teaching serves emancipatory endeavours. Taking examples from literacies learning, an emancipatory approach cannot be assumed to take the form of students exerting their own cultural identity, perhaps by telling stories in their own vernacular or promoting their cultural history and traditions. This may seem counter intuitive within the UK tradition of adult education with its longstanding and valued practices associated with encouraging students to voice their own stories (Woodin, 2008). ~~perhaps informed by the work of Raymond Williams (Westwood & McIlroy, 1998) and Richard Hoggart (1957).~~ If a wider understanding of discourse is employed, this also means that emancipatory education is not related to learning computer games, mastering social networking media or being identified with such discourse preferences.

By definition, there cannot be a series of instructions for liberation. But this does not suggest that Rancière has little to offer education other than a romantic assertion of faith as implied by McNay (2014). Nor does it follow that emancipatory education serves no purpose. There are significant questions about who gets to speak on the subject of inequality. At time of writing, we are witnessing an upsurge in racism and violence in Europe. In response, academics, journalists and politicians prepare their analyses whilst many voices remain unheard or are dismissed as uninformed. Importantly, Rancière reminds us that unless we hold to the belief that every single one of us is capable of speaking up for the concerns and cares of humanity, then emancipation surely has no point. When it comes to emancipation, everyone can acknowledge the equality of all people in the formulation and expression of their own opinions, where the role of the educator is to encourage, indeed demand, such speech. But, in practical terms, what is the quality of this speech and what should the educator do? I could state this question more broadly. What are we to do in this crisis, which the aforementioned 'social turn' has by all accounts failed to avert? Here logic runs out, for the

purpose of this writing cannot be to set out a series of instructions for emancipation, not least because what matters is that all of engage with such questions. But I can return to and restate the problem set out in this writing and offer clarification of what this implies for furthering the development of approaches of critical adult education.-

Critical approaches to adult education have been dominated by the idea that we cannot understand how we are oppressed without assistance from experts. In this vein, Wildemeerch made the case that the idea of ‘false-conscious’ may not be helpful (Wildemeerch, 2014) and -I add to this by stating how the axiomatic assumption that we cannot detect how our own discourse operates to replicate societal elites might also be counter-productive. Ranci re is helpful in reminding us that both of these influential notions are not ‘truths’ but ‘opinions’ that arguably might serve to replicate inequality. Educators and students may refuse to accept these opinions and act accordingly in their relationships with each other and ‘the world’. -This necessitates—means going beyond an education for empowerment aimed at changing social hierarchies at some point in the future, through the learning of dominant discourses, or gaining access to platforms from which some or any non-dominant discourses might be heard. Instead, attention - is drawn towards the relationships between teachers and students and in this sense it is a return to Freire’s emphasis on exploring and enacting human qualities in educational contexts. Here, it seems to me (Galloway, 2015) that notions of trust, hope, dignity, responsibility, intellectual equality and love resonate dangerously in ways that techniques relating to discourse production and identity formation do not.

Conclusion

In this writing I have revisited an existing discussion in this journal that addresses critical perspectives on adult education. Previously, Wildemeerch (2014) described the context of adult education in the 1970s as one where the idea that education might emancipate was prevalent, noting a subsequent shift so that nowadays adult education is less about ‘emancipation’ and more orientated towards a discourse of ‘empowerment’ aimed at assisting individuals to compete for employment within a globalised economy.

Taking Wildemeerch’s analysis further, I have defended the idea of both empowering and emancipatory education, making the case for distinguishing between the two notions. To do this, I considered the ideas informing literacies learning as an area of adult education that gained momentum in the 1970s alongside movements for social justice, which has been the subject of critical research and theorisation by academics. Here I have described how understandings of literacy in terms of power reproduction, discourse and identity have gained popularity, supporting educational practices that encourage students to reap benefits from participating within (or changing) dominant discourses.

Wildemeerch also expresses discomfort with the notion of emancipation most prevalent in the 1970s, namely, that the role of the educator is to employ dialogic techniques to guide them through to enlightenment as a way out of ‘false-consciousness’, popularly associated with interpretations of Freire’s critical pedagogy. I concur with this concern, but also make the case that the most common understandings of literacy for empowerment do not depart from Freire in an important respect. Both rely in some way upon the idea that students need assistance from experts if they are to understand their own oppression, with implications for who gets to speak and be heard. At the same time, Freire’s concern for human qualities such as love and trust in the context of equality and emancipation have come to be neglected in preference for the language of power.

The purpose of this writing was not to set out a series of practices that might allow educators to emancipate students. Rather, it was to critique the trajectory that adult education has taken over the last fifty years within the context of a continuing crisis of social inequality which cannot be left to supposed experts. To restate, Martin (2006) describes adult education in the 1970s as 'thinking big: it was an intellectual and ideological space where the flowers of argument about meanings and purposes and causes could grow and flourish', posing a question about where all the flowers have gone. The aim of this article is to stimulate discussion around the critical purpose of adult education, perhaps encouraging such blooms. How would we discuss and practice adult education if we refuse to accept that we cannot understand oppression without assistance? To paraphrase Raymond Williams, (see Westwood and McIlroy, 1993, p. 124)– this is a discussion that depends on the acknowledgement of an ultimate human equality. –Perhaps here the green shoots and flowers of argument around meanings and purposes in adult education might grow.

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